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ABSTRACT

In the face of declining student reading abilities, content area instructors at community colleges can no longer ignore the gap that exists between student reading levels and the higher levels at which college texts are written. Indeed, these instructors have a responsibility to include reading improvement in course objectives, because: (1) the ability of public schools to teach reading is limited by the fact that most people aren't capable of assimilative comprehension until the ages of 16 to 18; (2) the provision of special reading courses at the college level deflates the self-esteem and motivation of adult students; and (3) the use of lower-level texts can be self-defeating due to the unreliable results of standard procedures for determining text reading level. One method of assuming this responsibility is to provide for each text a section-by-section study guide composed of short-answer questions. Such Directed Reading Activities (DRA's) lead the student through a four-step process of reading comprehension: identifying the author's main point, recognizing ideas used to support this point, identifying details, and drawing conclusions from what has been read. DRA's keep students' minds focused on the reading, reinforce student learning, and enhance student motivation and self-esteem. (Illustrations of DRA questions are provided in the paper.) (JP)

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TEACHING CONTENT AND IMPROVING READING:

YOU CAN DO BOTH!

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Teaching Content and Improving Reading: You CAN Do Both!

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In spite of all the conflicts of opinions that usually surround the teaching profession, about one issue there appears to be a general consensus -- many of today's college students have reading skills that are inadequate for college level work! Statistics support teachers' experiences -- the average reading level at many schools today, especially two-year colleges, is around ninth grade. Naturally, our freshman and sophomore texts are usually written on the thirteenth and fourteenth grade level. It isn't surprising, knowing this, that our students have tremendous difficulty understanding their texts, and when they don't understand their reading assignments, they are less likely to understand the material we present in our lectures. Frustration and academic failure result.

WHO IS AT FAULT? We as content area professors have readily available defenses to explain why our students' reading problems are not our responsibilities. First, "obviously," it's the fault of our public schools, whose duty it is to teach reading -- "everyone" knows that! But can the blame actually be placed here? To some extent, perhaps (if that gives us any comfort when our students fail to learn), but not all the blame can be placed here.

Most reading skills that are needed in college cannot be learned until about the ages of 16-18. Younger people can comprehend literal meanings and be successful with interpretations to some extent, but the human mind is simply not sufficiently developed for evaluative and assimilative comprehension -- concepts vital to college level learning -- until these ages, (and even college educators don't usually deride the public schools for not teaching reading in high school, though perhaps we should suggest this).

Evaluative comprehension requires a standard against which to make a judgement, for it must determine accuracy, note biases, etc.; maturity of mind must be developed and standards determined before this level of comprehension is possible. Assimilative interpretations also require standards against which to judge as does evaluative comprehension, but assimilation goes a step further -- it involves rethinking one's own ideas on the basis of the new information. Younger people usually haven't developed such ideas to believe in and are not, therefore, prepared to re-think what does not yet exist in their own minds. College professors will readily recognize the need for these skills in questions they are likely to require of their classes such as

Judge the validity of Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to run for a fourth term.

Do you think it is necessary to protect all species that are in danger of extinction?

Well, if we can't blame our students' inability to read entirely on the public schools, and if they aren't mentally mature enough to acquire these skills until they are almost college age anyway, then let them take reading courses in college. We all offer them. That will solve the problem.

But does it? A great number of today's college students are not only adults, but older adults -- very often much older adults. It's very difficult for them to start to college at their ages; they lack self-confidence in their learning abilities anyway, and often there is good reason for their feeling that they have inadequate reading and study skills. But then after they muster the enormous courage necessary to make the gigantic step to enter college at all, we tell them they need to take a course in reading? When "everyone knows" you learn to read by the fourth grade?! If they have any faith in their chances for success, this may be all it takes to crush it. It's simply embarrassing for an adult, and especially an older adult, to admit that he can't read!

Many colleges unintentionally support the students' attitudes toward reading courses by deprecating their value and esteem by allowing them to carry only elective credit. And even if students do enroll in reading courses, all too often the materials in the courses -- no matter how good -- are not based on content area material; as a result, it is difficult for the already skeptical student to see the relevance of the reading course to his "real" college classes. Motivation may then decline and, in all likelihood, effectiveness as well.

But there is yet another solution! Select texts with lower reading levels! There are some fairly obvious pitfalls to this solution, such as (for beginners) what do we do about teaching the "Declaration of Independence," Emerson and Thoreau, or natural and physical sciences? And even ignoring the obvious, that all important selling-point, reading level, can be very misleading. Consider these as examples:

Them dirty lousy politicians is getting altogether too high and mighty, the way they is always arranging to take advantage of the little businessmen by raising up the tax payments and collecting more money from the little fellows. They ain't nothing much can be done about this here business, because them politicians has certainly got the inside connections and they always work through under-cover arrangements. It's mighty funny that the generals and the admirals and the presidents of the big corporations aren't paying out no oversized tax installments but only just the little businessmen who aren't getting much money nohow.

Education Required: college graduate
(16th grade reading level)
Audience: top 4½ of population
Similar Publication: Yale Review

You ask me, do you, how fares the morpheme? I tell you it is the warp and woof of style. Use it awry and your style is inept. Like Peter, you must grasp its forte. The suffix adds crisp closure to the word. The prefix shapes the things to come. By their apt use, you do but whet your style. Your prose takes on a new semantic sheen. Your yen for verbal zest now finds an open way. You see your style is not less trite. Your peers will laud your éclat. You will preempt a place among our mentors.

Education Required: 4th grade
Audience: 90% of population
Similar Publication: comics²

These ratings resulted from the use of a typical procedure for determining reading levels of material.

That solution isn't acceptable either, so where does this leave us? Certainly we -- the content area professors -- aren't responsible. We're NOT reading teachers. We never wanted to be nor do we intend to be! So now what?

As we've explored all the possible sources on which to place the blame and can find no adequate candidate, including ourselves, we may as well face facts. If we're going to successfully teach content area material, realistically, we MUST deal with reading problems. No, we aren't reading teachers, and we aren't actually going to teach our students how to read, but there are successful techniques we can implement to improve our students' reading comprehension, both in our classes and in those of our colleagues.

DIRECTED READING ACTIVITIES Basically, there are four reading skills that must be mastered to be successful in comprehending college level content area material. One must be able to recognize in a given passage the main ideas, supporting ideas, and the details, as well as to be able to draw conclusions or make inferences based on what has been read. If students have enough experience in seeking awareness of these four concepts in their reading assignments, they will better understand the text, and they will subconsciously transfer these four skills to all their reading. The technique which improves these skills, in reading jargon, is called directed reading activities or DRA's.

DRA's do just what the term suggests -- direct reading. Preparing DRA's to improve students' understanding of our texts simply involves preparing paragraph by paragraph or section by section study guides that require the students to look for main ideas, supporting ideas, details, and to make inferences. If the students have these simple activities to perform as they read, they are guided to

recognize the four areas which will result in good comprehension. As examples, typical activities or questions/statements to use for a paragraph might be

- a) What is the author's main idea in this paragraph?
- b) What two points does the author use as evidence to support his theory that students should earn their post-secondary financial aid?
- c) What battle, experiment, technique, etc. is discussed here?
- d) Circle two words that suggest that the setting described in this paragraph is near the seacoast.
- e) If what the author says is true, why do you think a problem still exists?
- f) Why do you think the author described these people as "good people"?

In order of occurrence, these six activities require the students to recognize the paragraphs' a) main idea, b) supporting ideas, c) detail, d) details, e) to draw a conclusion, and f) to draw a conclusion.

DRA's keep the students' minds focused on the reading and thus improve their comprehension of the passage read, but in addition, as practice makes perfect, performing these activities and answering the questions help the students to subconsciously learn to recognize and read for main ideas, supporting ideas, and details as well as to develop the ability to make inferences in all their reading. Their overall reading comprehension skills improve no matter what they read! Positive reinforcement results; the students can actually directly experience, "see," success not only in the readings which are accompanied by DRA's, but also in their reading assignments in other courses they are taking. There is a definite "snowballing" effect.

Constructing DRA's is easy, though very time-consuming. You literally read a paragraph or section in your text and write a simple question or statement that requires a response which reflects one of the four basic reading skills. But the effects on student comprehension of providing DRA's for their reading assignments are absolutely tremendous! This technique aids almost every problem -- students who read so quickly they miss points, students who read so slowly they can't

connect the ideas presented, students who just read the words and don't know what they should be getting from them, and students who read the words and don't concentrate at all, the in-one-ear-out-the-other-ear variety.

Student responses' to DRA's have been extremely favorable. It really doesn't take much time for the students to mark or write their responses to DRA's, so they don't object to the extra "work." And they are so pleased themselves with the difference these activities make in their understanding, most are happy to make the necessary responses. Often using a DRA with their reading makes the difference between successfully understanding a meaningful reading assignment (success) and aimlessly reading words that mean little or nothing -- dutifully going through the motions (failure and frustration). It isn't difficult for us to see which provides positive reinforcement and learning. For many students DRA's result in their actually understanding their college reading assignments, which may be a novel experience for them! They are really pleased because they actually "get something" from their hours with their textbooks. This usually results in their understanding the classroom lecture better than before, and the ultimate result is improved academic success.

Success breeds success. Self-confidence increases, and it is a fairly accepted fact that one is more successful when he thinks success is possible than when he doesn't. Students become more successful in other classes as well as ours, and, suddenly it seems, frustration and failure are replaced with success and self-confidence. That's a changed life! What more could a teacher want?

The more students use DRA's the more their reading comprehension skills are improved. Using these reading guides in one course can only do so much, but perhaps that "so much" is more than you would think. As an example, my success with DRA's has been phenomenal. In a study conducted last spring quarter in two of my

Composition II courses in which I have prepared DRA's for the text, I administered the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Form C, the first day of classes and the Nelson-Denny Reading Test, Form D, the last day of classes to test my students' comprehension improvement. I enjoyed the following results in a ten week quarter:

Sixty percent of the students' comprehension scores improved; the average improvement was 2.2 grades (two years, two months).

While these are not guaranteed results, testing such as this along with the immense success I have been able to observe and the tremendously encouraging feedback from my students in the classes for which I have provided DRA's have certainly convinced me that they are a realistic and practical answer to possibly our biggest problem in college teaching -- students who have poor reading comprehension skills.

Obviously, individual efforts in preparing DRA's are extremely time-consuming even though it is relatively easy, simple work, and students are almost certain to be extremely responsive and appreciative. The rewards are many, but time remains a problem! However, one-man-efforts are not the only way to accomplish a program that will aid our students tremendously. Group or department efforts would make constructing DRA's for our texts a project not overly demanding of any one person's time. And the results would be phenomenal! Well, here's a way to make that possible. And there is no doubt that if we undertook a united effort and provided these desperately needed aids in many of our content area classes, we would greatly improve our students' reading comprehension skills and their success.

¹Dorcas S. Saunders, "Reading in the Content Area," Workshop, Shelby State Community College (October, 1978).

²Martha Maxwell, "Readability: Have We Gone Too Far?," Journal of Reading XXI, 6 (March, 1978): p. 527.

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